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Gender, Leadership, and the Igbo Woman: A Study of Some Selected Works of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Abstract

In African Society, just like any other human society, the birth of a child is greeted with joy. Igbo land is not an exception but the excitement is more when the child is a male. Therefore, traditionally in Igboland the discrimination against the female child starts right from the birth. Time changes everything. Education and urbanization enhanced women emancipation and liberation. The female writers emerged and emphasized the need for a change. They believe that they can protect themselves with intelligence, independent minds, higher education, enhanced earning capacity and social status. Women have made efforts to promote gender equality in leadership roles. Some women even went further in shaping political system through their leadership roles. This paper examines how Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as female novelists succeeded in enriching African literature with the point of view: that women are good leaders and Africans should adopt a change of attitudes towards women and leadership. They must mould anew the African attitude to women as an integral part of an African living culture, and not an oppressive static past in restructuring Africa.

Keywords: Igboland, Discrimination, Female child, Emancipation and Leadership.

Introduction

Traditional African culture has always expected women to play secondary role to men in every aspect of their existence. Discrimination of male over female children still goes on in most parts of Africa. The male is considered more important than his female counterpart and young males are taught at an early age that they are superior to women. The female leaves her family of birth after marriage so male children are

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preferred. A girl is therefore trained right from infancy to fulfill this expectation in the most appropriate manner. John P Jordan (1971) writes that "A girl's life therefore, was not accidentally but essentially a preparation for marriage. It was her one great object in life. If she failed in that, she was considered to have nullified her existence" (210).

Early marriage was very common in Africa especially in Igboland (Eastern Nigeria). Young girls marry at the age of infancy depending on the part of Igboland and their custom. Some marriage takes place just after the birth of a baby girl in which the suitor brings kola nut and wine. The mother of the child pours the wine in a plate and then feeds the child and she is betrothed. In some other parts, girls are given out in marriage at the tender age of about twelve or thirteen when they are expected to be virgins.

After marriage, the discrimination leads to the belief in Igbo culture that the place of a woman is in the kitchen. By this the men mean that the essence of womanhood is best realized in the house. Child bearing and rearing, taking care of household and occasionally giving advice to men on things common to them are the roles played by women. In most cases, women are regarded as their husbands' property, bought with money for these obligations.

However, there has been a gradual change and women revolted against some social norms and laws that deprived them of their independent existence as individuals and made them men's appendages. Women have changed a great deal in their approach to marriage. Some Nigerian novelists like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ifeoma Okoye and others presented women in their novels as being feministic; that is asserting themselves by deviating from the traditionally accepted code of conduct for women to be sold to domestic slavery and given away as child-brides to aged husbands of parental choice. These female novelists present the need for a change and these changes are inevitable. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie not only followed the foot prints of their older counterparts but also presented the leadership of women in Igbo society as powerful and productive.

This research work is done using psychoanalytic approach to criticism which Sigmund Freud first laid out in the late 19th century. Psychoanalytic theorists believe that human behaviour is deterministic. It is governed by irrational forces, and the unconscious, as well as instinctual and biological drives. Due to this deterministic process, psychoanalytic theorists do not believe in free will. Freud later shifted the focus of physiological studies to the study of the mind and the related psychological attributes making up the mind.

Sigmund Freud determined that the personality consists of three different elements, the id, the ego and the superego. The id is the aspect of personality that is driven by internal and basic drives and needs. Due to the instinctual quality of the id, it is impulsive and often unaware of implications of actions. The ego is driven by the reality principle. The ego works to balance both the id and superego. In order to balance these, it works to achieve the id's drive in the most realistic ways. The superego is driven by morality principle. It acts in connection with the morality of higher thought and action. Instead of instinctually acting like the id, the superego

works to act in socially acceptable ways. It employs morality, judging our sense of wrong and right and using guilt to encourage socially acceptable behavior (Friedman & Schustack 2011).

When analysing literary texts, psychoanalytic theory could be utilized to decipher or interpret the concealed meaning within a text, or to better understand the author's intentions. Through the analysis of motives, Freud's theory can be used to help clarify the meaning of the writing as well as the actions of the characters within the text. In this paper, some of the men who are appointed as warrant chiefs who fight the tradition and culture of the people are driven by the desire to have wealth and power. This leads to the problem of the people, which the women leaders tend to solve. The women leaders discussed in this paper built their political culture by not acting impulsively (id) but by thinking before acting to control their id's drive and moral training which encourages socially accepted behaviour (superego) thereby building a more proper human relationship in their communities. They refused to accept the norm and culture that wanted to perpetually keep the female child as secondary, but they wished to claim by rationally embarking in training and studying under respectable men and women seen as models in the community to give them back their voice or their true selves. Rationalizing the id instinct, these women leaders discussed in this paper judge the people's sense of wrong and encourage them to exhibit a socially accepted behaviour. The female characters in the selected novels judge the patriarchal unjust practices in Igbo culture that discriminate against the female child and fight for their assertion that helped them to take up responsibilities when men in the novels failed.

Women and Leadership in Igboland as Presented in the Selected Feminist Texts

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), *House of Symbols* (2001) and *Children of the Eagle* (2002) constitute a trilogy based on the history of Umuga. Men and women in the four generations of two families are explored in this trilogy. Women with their intelligence, wisdom and other leadership qualities administer the affairs of the communities of Umuga in a remarkable and impressive manner.

In her *The Last of the Strong Ones* she adds a new dimension to contemporary Nigerian fiction in the way she presents the leadership of women in Umuga community. The women of this community are so vigorous in their ideas and actions that they see to the smooth, peaceful and successive cordial human relationship among the entire members of the community. Their leadership qualities and roles confirm the undeniable fact that some of our present day societies have been suffering a lot of setbacks due to the fact that women's contributions are neglected much because of patriarchal prejudice.

The women leaders in *The Last of the Strong Ones* are of the groups, *inform of the umuada (an association of daughters)* and *alutaradi (an association of wives)*. There is also *obuofo* (the inner council committee which is made up of twelve selected men from the four villages of Umuga) that help the women in the community

governance. These three groups therefore form the governing council of the community.

Generally in Igboland *Umuada or Umuokpu* is a powerful political association of daughters of the patrilineage that have married out of the community. They are highly respected because of their powerful political roles in Igbo society. E. Amucheazi (2002) confirms this by saying that:

> This association was usually involved in settlement of disputes among sections of the community or on serious issues affecting the community. In this role, they had in the past succeeded where men failed for such was the respect accorded them that the community was never inclined to dispute their judgment (247).

In order to pass on the ancestral wisdom of the people of Umuga to the future generations, these women leaders gather the younger women and children at their feet to teach them the ways of the land. According to Adimora-Ezeigbo, they believe that "there is a multitude of things that every child needed to know in order to have a deep understanding of their past achievements as well as failures" (Adimora-Ezeigbo 1996: 1). This gives the younger ones a clear awareness of their future hopes and aspirations. The teaching voice of their elderly and women leaders knew how to extract truths from their historic myths and folklores to properly instruct and equip their younger generations.

The Umuada in *The Last of the Strong Ones* comprises of twenty women from the four villages of Umuga. Each village also chooses one *nwada* in a group of top women representatives known as *Oluada*. The *oluada* are the voice of the women, which is equivalent of speakers in the present-day House of Assembly/ Representatives. Two women are also chosen among the remaining sixteen *Umuada* as record keepers and special advisers to the *Oluada*. These two women always have the quality of being gifted singers and story-tellers. They are equivalent to the present-day secretary of governments and personal advisers. Though they do not have formal education to read and write down the records; they are intelligent and have retentive memory and always store ancestral wisdom and achievements in the form of praise songs and poetic chants which they perform in their meetings both to entertain themselves and also maintain an accurate sense of the people's history by looking into the past, the present and the future.

The *Umuada*, *Oluada* and *Obuofo* as respectable men and women are seen as models in the community. They render selfless services to the community. They are not like the present-day politicians who parade the streets trailing about never fulfilled campaign promises with 'Honourable' affixed to their names. The younger generation aspires to be like them. Their self sacrificing services are always chanted as they hold their meetings rotating from the house of one *oluada* to another. These meetings were constantly held when they were preparing to fight a war with *kosiri* - the district administrator and other colonial administrators. In the house of Ejimnaka the leader of *Umuada* and *Oluada*, she is presented as 'Lioness that leads the pack.' Adimora writes that "Ejimnaka, mother of the land, you were born to lead. Favourite child of the great Ezeukwu - who was the terror of the *Agbaja* strong man... *Oluada*, cream of Umuga

daughters (Adimora-Ezeigbo 1996: 39). Onyekozuru, one of the *oluada* is presented as" daughter of your father, Ezeigwe, the master blacksmith, whose skill baffled even spirits, woman of peace (Adimora-Ezeigbo 1996: 60).

Chieme, the third *oluda*, has her own qualities presented:

> Chieme, Daughter of Nlebedum, the warrior renowned for strength and Nnuola, the singer and leader of women. *Oluada* who showed the world that woman's reputation does not depend on a husband. You defiled Agwu, the spirit of disorder and deformity. You wrestled with adversity and took the bull of life by the horns. Your triumph is enviable and has made you the greatest funeral artiste in Umuga and in the surrounding towns. Your life is a source of inspiration to Umuga women whom you led with wisdom. (Adimora-Ezeigbo 1996: 98)

Chibuka, the forth oluada, was also applauded for her achievement and leadership qualities which are presented in the praise song of the women as:

> Chibuka, daughter of Umeahuruanya, the strong man who communed day and night with ancestral spirits. Leader of women, your life instructs the world that the hour a farmer begins work is the morning of his day. Oluada, you are the mushroom that breaks the earth without a hoe. Daughter of Umuga, you are the squirrel that scales the iroko. Woman of many parts, the one who is pushed but is not thrown. For you, solitude became a source of strength; your scorched soul was lulled by soothing tone of silence. You fought and defeated the demon of bad marriage with the thunder of patience. We greet you (Adimora-Ezeigbo 1996: 124).

This novel vividly portrays the eradication of the barriers that place the woman in a state of second class citizen. Also, the female gender in decision-making processes of Umuga community enhances self and communal development and empowerment. These women leaders are truly empowered and they put their whole efforts and strength in their service to mankind.

Umuada remains solidly behind *Obuofo* and the Umuga men and women in the war with *kosiri*. Before the actual war, they review the part women play in the preparation for war. They make plans in their regular meetings for their expected roles if the war breaks out. They agree to take charge of the purchase and preparation of food for the fighters. They also agree that every woman will be involved in the war effort. Even as the sorrow at losing the war, which lasted seven months, is heavy in the minds of the people, they are still determined to fight for their tradition. This is really self sacrificing service. *Kosiri* finds out that the people are determined. He then used the surrounding towns where the people of Umuga took refuge to win the war. The towns are asked to eject the people of Umuga, which they did. When the people of Umuga are in a state of confusion of how to go back home, *Kosiri* asks them to surrender their guns and members of *Obuofo*. These men yield themselves for the good of their land. The leadership then rests solely on the women when the inner council committee is no more. They continue to fight for the cause of their people. Ejimnaka, the leader of *Umuada* and *Oluada* even died in the fight. A woman of her age climbs an Ukpaka tree after a boy of twelve to thirteen years. She is infuriated

when she climbs to confront the boy because she does not see just the boy but the image of Uzuegbu, the boy's father. Uzuegbu is one of the warrant chiefs from Umuga that *Kosiri* used to fight their own people and tradition. She sees *Kosiri*, the wicked colonial administrator, who is also the source of her sorrow and disjointed life. Ejimnaka's husband Obiatu is among the *Obuofu* who yield their lives to save their people. They cannot tell what happen to them. With vigour she fights till she dies falling from the tree. Her agility till death confirms the praise song of the women of Umuga that Ejimnaka is a lioness that leads the pack, the thundering tigress of Umuga.

In *House of Symbols*, the Umuada of Umuga exhibits a kind of drama to show their annoyance over the family of Josiah (Osai) Obidiegwu and Ugonwanyi (Eaglewoman) Okwara. They form an untidy mass moving in the direction of Eke Market chanting angrily to show the content of their hearts. Their action is also to win the *Umuada* of Umulobia to their side. Ezeigbo presented the *Umuada* chaotic movement in the proper way the authority of these women association stands.

> A large group of women clad in *wrappa* and *itepu* occupy the tarred road, making it difficult for the occasional vehicle to drive past. They form untidy mass, moving in the direction of Eke Market, about one and a half kilometers away. Before they trot past the County Headquarters, they halt briefly, their chant rising to a high pitch. They shake the twigs and green leaves in their hands in a threatening gesture. They squirm like a mass of soldier ants which has taken over a path. Then they trudge on their chant echoes behind them as a town crier's message (Adimora-Ezeigbo 2001: 280).

This clearly depicts the actions of angry women who want to retaliate against Osai and Eaglewoman. The *Umuada* of Umuga trek all the way to Atagu to complain that Osai and the Police arrested their sons and husbands. Even though Osai is innocent of their accusation, they want to have him ejected by the community where he resides. As leaders they think that their actions will make the people of Umulobia or Umuada of Umulobia join them to persuade Osai to seek for the release of three Umuga men the police arrested for attacking the district officer. The Umuada of Umulobia do not agree with them to chase Josiah Okwara and his family rather they advise them to return home to their families and people to assist the men of Umuga to settle the quarrel they have which seem to have split the town into two warring camps. The root cause of the arrest of the three Umuga men is the disunity between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church. The Whitman's religion brought disunity and division into a well organised and established culture and tradition of Umuga communities. The men and women of Umulobia do not see any reason in fighting a man and his family when they are peaceful and friendly. This shows that the leadership of the people is just. The people of Umulobia feed the Umuada of Umuga and instruct them to vacate the market because the following day is their Eke market day. The advice, instruction and actions of the people of Umulobia are like the equivalent of the present day actions of the International Court of Justice in curbing the excessive actions of Heads of State or Presidents of nations over the masses.

Ezeigbo's *Children of the Eagle* focuses on the family of Mr. and Mrs. Josiah (Osai) Obediegwu and Ugonwanyi (Eaglewoman) Okwara. They have five daughters

and a boy whose lives form the centre of Eaglewoman. These five daughters of Osai and Eaglewoman through their leadership qualities bring tremendous change to Umuga community and the entire humanity. They return to Umuga yearly – at the end of the year – to hold memorial services for their father and also pray at the graves of their grand and great grand parents. They exhibit a lot of other leadership roles to the community during their yearly visit. For instance, they teach the *alutaradi* of their extended family new types of food and how to prepare them. They also teach them how to cook vegetables without killing the vitamin content. Human relationships especially how a husband and wife should relate in terms of enjoying sex are also part of their teachings. These village women see oral communication during sex as abomination in Igbo culture but they are taught that it helps the couple to improve on where they are not performing well. This, according to their educated and exposed sisters-in-law, has caused a lot of marriages to hit the rocks.

Ogonna and Nnene, the two older daughters of Osai Okwara through their intelligence and wisdom are able to finally put to a stop the quarrel over the boundary of land between their father's family and the family of William Umeako. The sons of Umeako always cut down the *agbudu* – boundary marker – used to demarcate the disputed land because they look down on the female children of the family of Okwara. They know that culture does not allow women to own land, so women cannot fight for land. To them Nkemdirim, the only male issue of the family, is only a small boy. As they keep cutting down the boundary marker, these two daughters of Osai carefully write a letter to Ogunano Ezeala, the highest decision-making in their village, telling him that they have made arrangement for concrete pillars to be erected as a permanent prevention for such occurrences. They indicate that they are to provide the cement, sand, gravel and pay a workman to do the job. Even though the men try to argue that Nkemdirim, the only male child of Osai Okwara's family, is not present when they come to erect the pillar; the women are able to convince them with their wisdom to go on with the work. This is done and the land dispute is settled.

Adimora-Ezeigbo presents the third daughter of Osai Okwara as a church leader and pastor-evangelist. She has the qualities that help her to be a success in her ministry. This shows that women also play leadership roles in spiritual matters. Obioma's life proves this. She even confirms that as both a pastor and an evangelist, her ministry is directed to men and women even to children but she chooses her favourite topic, which she tends to find more interesting. She is expert in marriage counselling. To her, a woman's body explains the word of God for the body is symbolic as well as physical. For instance she explains that:

> Not just sacred but symbolic. The women's body is particularly symbolic of spiritual growth. The woman herself is a miracle. Her body is the source of life and its sustenance. Her womb moulds and cocoons life; her breast milk is a source of nourishment. Her monthly flow is a means of regeneration and purification: It is wrong to see it as a sign of uncleanness as some people do (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2002: 161).

Obioma clearly points out that the biological factors that make women different should not be used to subjugate them and dash their ambition rather 'women should be fully engaged in nation building' (Adimora-Ezeigbo 2002: 162).

Adimora-Ezeigbo also presents Ezenwanyi, the prophetess, in *House of Symbols* as a teacher and instructor. Ezenwanyi instructs people how to serve God and at the same time protect their tradition. In presenting Ezenwanyi as a character, Ezeigbo points out that God is genderless. Ezenwanyi explains to Osai and Eaglewoman that:

> Chukwu is Man and Woman fused together in pure essence. In spiritual form, Man and Woman are two sides of Chukwu at the point of creation. Hence Chukwu is both Father and Mother. The two rolled into one. Being the essence of Man and Woman, Chukwu is thus genderless. God has no gender though today different peoples and cultures represent the creator as male. Our ancestors and ancestresses worshiped the Supreme Creator. Then came the white people who converted our people to their religion. They and their followers called our ancestors pagans or heathens who have no knowledge of the Supreme Creator, Chukwu or Chineke – the name that became increasingly used by the converts. How far from the truth! What a distortion! Fabricated by people with deluded minds. They do not know that the Chukwu or Chineke the Christians worship is the same worshipped by our ancestors. There is no difference, except that Christians have imposed a single identity on the Supreme Creator: Male. They see Chukwu as Father, throwing away the Female essence of the Creator. By limiting the Creator to Father, they do great injustice to the Creator. The creator is all things: they seem not to realize this (Adimora-Ezeigbo 2001: 47-48).

It is seen that God created human beings male and female and endowed them with wisdom and strength to lead or have dominion over the other creatures but men and tradition fight this good intention of God. They therefore limit the power of God in not allowing women to partake in decision making. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo in presenting the wisdom and leadership qualities of her female characters portrays the stubborn determination of women to achieve their goals.

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Aunty Ifeoma, the sister of Eugene Achike, even though a widow, takes over the responsibility of taking care of their father when Eugene fails as a man. Eugene has the money and every other thing needed to make life comfortable to his father but his fanatic belief in Catholicism makes him to cruelly abuse his father. He says that his father is a pagan and traditionalist and therefore is not to be allowed into his mansion. He refuses even to visit his father because to him it is sin to have anything to do with pagans. Even when his children are to visit their grand father they are allowed to stay only for fifteen minutes or face the consequences. It is Ifeoma and her children that visit their aged father, stay with him, take him around the village, take him to their house at Nsukka whenever he is sick, pay his medical bills, employ a young girl to live with him in the village to keep him company so that he will feel happy to have brought forth children into this world. Ifeoma continues taking care of her father until he joins his ancestors.

When Eugene raises the issue of calling a priest to give their father last blessing at his death and gives him a catholic funeral so that he will partake of the funeral, Ifeoma, his sister, is mad at him. She stands her ground and vows that instead of her not to give her father traditional burial and funeral rights, she sells her husband's grave. She carries out the funeral right of her father and therefore takes the responsibility of a man in her father's family. This is a mark of strong will and determination of women to achieve their leadership roles. This determination is portrayed in the way Ifeoma shouts at Eugene to shut his mouth up as he talks of giving their father a Catholic funeral.

> 'Ifeoma, did you call a priest? Papa asked.
>
> 'Is that all you can say, eh Eugene? Have you nothing else to say *gbo*? Our father died! Has your head turned upside down! Will you not help me bury our father?'
>
> 'I cannot participate in a pagan funeral but we can discuss with the parish priest and arrange a Catholic funeral.'
>
> Aunty Ifeoma got up and started to shout. Her voice unsteady. 'I will put my dead husband's grave up for sale, Eugene, before I give our father a Catholic funeral. Do you hear me? I said I will sell Ifediora's grave first. Was our father a Catholic? I ask you, Eugene, was he a catholic? *Uchu gba gi*.' Aunty Ifeoma snapped her finger at Papa; she was throwing a curse at him. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She made choking sounds as she turned and walked into her bedroom (Adichie: *Purple Hibiscus* 186-187).

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna and her twin sister Kainene show strong determination in achieving leadership roles too. During the Nigerian/Biafra war most men went into hiding leaving the responsibility of feeding the starving families to women. Odenigbo takes solace in drinking *ogogoro* [alcohol] after hearing about his mother's death. Olanna takes over the management of the house. She goes out to get food and protein tablets brought to the refugee camps by relief planes. She also goes into teaching the children. When the school is taken over by the soldiers, she changes the venue of the teaching to her house. When they are told to pack out from where they live, she teaches in the refugee camp. Kainene's leadership qualities are so much that she is in-charge of one of the refugee camps where starving women and children live. She gathers the women and they cultivate their own farms to supplement the food supplies in the camp.

When the priests that work in the refugee camp fail in their duties, Kainene dismisses them and finds alternative means of managing the camp. Father Marcel and Father Jude whose works are to distribute *garri*, breaking up of fights and supervising the farms discharge their duties together with sexually abusing the hungry young girls. This is brought to light when Urenwa, a small girl becomes pregnant. At first they think that the protruding belly is a symptom of kwashiorkor. As the belly continues to protrude it is discovered that the girl is pregnant. It takes the leadership quality of Kainene to reveal the person responsible for the pregnancy. Kainene is so infuriated over what the priest has done. The way she handles the case proves that

even ordained priests couldn't make a woman that is determined to execute her leadership role turn back. Adichie presents the actions of Kainene when she discovers the true source of Urenwa's pregnancy thus:

> 'Can you believe who is responsible for the small girl Urenwa's pregnancy? Kainene asked, and Ugwu almost did not recognize her. Her eyes bulged out of her angular face, filled with rage and tears. 'Can you believe it is Father Marcel?'
>
> Olanna stood up, *Gini*? What are you saying?'
>
> Apparently I've been blind; she's not the only one,' Kainene said. 'He fucks most of them before he gives them the crayfish that I slave to get here.'
>
> Later, Ugwu watched Kainene push at Father Marcel's chest with both hands, shouting into his face, '*Amusu*! You devil!' Then she turned to Father Jude. 'How could you stay here and let him spread the legs of starving girls? How will you account for this to your god? You both are leaving now, right now. I will take this to Ojukwu myself if I have to.
>
> There were tears running down her face. There was something magnificent in her rage. Ugwu felt stained about his new duties after the priests left-distributing *garri*, breaking up fights, supervising the scorched and failing farms. He wondered what Kainene would say, what she would do to him, feel about him if she ever knew about the girls in the bar. She would loathe him. So would Olanna (Adichie: *Half of a Yellow Sun* 198-199).

The way Kainene handles the priest's sexual exploitation of the young girls makes Ugwu regret being involved in the act of cruelty against women. Ugwu and other soldiers gang-rape a young woman they come across without considering the psychological trauma the girls pass through. When men who are even supposed to be spiritual leaders join other men who as dogs eat the bones hung on their necks, it takes the leadership of women to render some solace and to cater for the starving at the refugee camp.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the leadership role of women in these selected novels, it is clear that women are competent leaders. It is only through political equality that a happier and more understanding relationship should exist between two sexes. For years now, workshops, seminars and protest campaigns on gender equality have been high; yet some nations, especially African nations, just pay lip-service to the idea. They deliberately neglect the female gender in decision-making processes. This political inequality has made many nations to suffer untold backwardness in terms of development. Most men use the women only as mere campaign tools. These women are discarded after the men are elected into power. It is only the eradication of the barriers in patriarchal and patrilineal African societies that will make for true democracy in Africa.

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